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South China's Biotech Outreach Success Story

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Report Highlights:

Summary: In the past three years, ATO Guangzhou has devoted significant resources to biotechnology outreach in South China. ATO Guangzhou has organized educational training seminars tailored to grains inspectors and meeting the needs of local port officials, researchers, scientists, university students as well as the media. In 2011, ATO Guangzhou with support from Embassy Beijing States Department funding organized a seminar with Dr. Roger Beachy to discuss biotechnology development. Dr. Beachy shared the stage with local scientist, Dr. Nian Hai who covered several examples of advantages to growing and consuming genetically modified foods. Following this success, ATO Guangzhou with support from Embassy Beijing staff partnered up with the leading biotechnology firm in South China, BGI, to craft a biotechnology forum featuring Cornell University's Dr. Frank Shotkoski. ATO Guangzhou also took advantage of this seminar to introduce the newly hired U.S. Grain Council's China representative Dr. Bryan Lohmar. Dr. Lohmar delivered a stellar presentation at the biotechnology forum.

General Information:



ATO Director looking at US corn samples at a CIQ lab

Dialoguing with the gate keepers: Prior to the biotechnology forum held in Shenzhen on December 14, ATO Guangzhou requested meetings with Guangdong Province's quarantine and inspection bureau (CIQ) and Shenzhen CIQ to gauge their understanding of U.S. genetically modified feed grains. During the meeting with Guangdong CIQ, Post was told that Guangdong Province imported 1.66 million tons of soybeans from the United States, accounting for over 23 percent of the total soybean imports to China in the first 11 months of 2012. 1.26 million tons of U.S. corn and 290,000 tons of U.S. wheat were also reported during the same 11 months. During the same period, 240,000 tons of U.S. soybeans, 1.03 million tons of U.S. corn, and 400,000 tons of U.S. wheat were imported through Shenzhen Port.

On BT Wheat: Guangdong Provincial CIQ revealed that policies on biotech wheat were managed by the Development and Reform Committee and the National Grains Bureau, but asked the local U.S. Wheat representative who also participated in this meeting, whether the United States would commercialize biotech wheat varieties. CIQ officials mentioned that they suspected China would encourage biotech wheat imports in the coming years given the recent crop information and further explained the limitations on China's land and water resources. According to CIQ, U.S. wheat imports for just about every quality and variety are entering South China for blending operations. CIQ Shenzhen mentioned that they conduct random testing on all shipments of imported wheat to check whether these contain genetically modified organisms.

CIQ officers reiterated their thanks to ATO Guangzhou for the opportunity to regularly communicate directly with U.S. industry representatives, technical experts, and scientists. In 2012 alone, ATO Guangzhou has engaged both Guangdong Provincial and Shenzhen CIQs on eight occasions to discuss frozen meat, fresh produce, biotechnology, and dairy trade cooperation concerns. With specific regards to biotechnology, frontline inspection officers and laboratory analysts requested greater knowledge on the following points:

- The differences between #2 and #3 corn varieties
- Periodic seminars highlighting the different traits of products originating from different States
- Notification about shipments with many numerous stacked events mixed together arriving at port (the cost of running testing for every possible event is costly according to CIQ inspectors)
- Why is the approved BT176 variety never present U.S. corn shipments?
- What events/traits are no longer in commercial use in the United States?
- Where is the list of U.S. approved traits?

- Responses to pests and weeds found in U.S. soybean and corn shipments

Port Management: Visiting U.S. scientists, USDA grains cooperators and visitors from Embassy Beijing colleagues gained a better understanding of China's importation procedures after visiting the Chiwan Port in Shenzhen. The Port has been one of the earliest ports in Mainland China with the capacity to handle U.S. oilseeds and feed grains. According to the Chiwan management, it normally takes around ten calendar days for U.S. soybean shipments to clear inspection and quarantine procedures, while 16 days are needed to clear U.S. corn and wheat shipments. Chiwan managers mentioned it was imperative the two governments maintain regular ongoing communication so that importation could be smoother. What many of the U.S. side interpreted from this statement was that it was an insinuation that grain inspection procedures in China could be influenced by political forces.

Amplifying the message on a public forum



Dr. Shotkoski presenting on Shenzhen Biotechnology Forum

In order to reach to a wider audience, ATO Guangzhou leveraged the platform of the Shenzhen Biotechnology Forum and arranged Dr. Frank Shotkoski and Dr. Bryan Lohmar as key note speakers during the event. Other speakers were scientists from top universities and institutions, such as Yale University, University of Edinburgh, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, National University of Singapore and Peking University. On the forum, Dr. Shotkoski and Dr. Lohmar advocated to academics and China's policy makers to embrace biotechnology as an option help alleviate food security concerns. His observations on biotechnology efficiencies during the presentation were directed at government agencies, industry and the general public as according to

Dr. Shotkoski "everyone has a role to play in the acceptance of biotechnology." With the growing population in China, declining arable land and changing climate conditions, GMO crops will be essential in feeding countries with large populations as well as natural resource limitations added Dr. Shotkoski. Dr. Shotkoski's bold and direct message reached 10 local media outlets and an audience of 150 who attended the conference.

Educating Media and readers: Although the message is clear and the science is not that new as Dr. Shotkoski reiterated throughout his presentations and in media interviews, most media outlets remain cautious when reporting on biotechnology. The local government has an invisible presence when it comes to open communication on the topic. At the provincial level, it is unclear which government agency is responsible for what aspects of biotechnology and most government offices refer back to Beijing for guidance on how to engage when asked. As a result, the general public and local media are not clear on biotechnology: the benefits or risks. Some citizens chose to trust rumors posted on the internet by fear mongering NGOs, while some fear they are being used as guinea pigs to test U.S. biotechnology products. Media interviews reflected this sentiment as two reporters opened their interviews with similar questions about "why U.S. consumers do not eat genetic modified food, yet export these products to China". According to Dr. Lohmar, the reason behind this distrust is attributed to lack of public guidance and outreach from a government entity and an official stance and response countering the unsubstantiated criticisms to this technology.

ATO Guangzhou arranged two major media interviews for Dr. Shotkoski in Shenzhen: The South

China Morning Post (newspaper and online media) and World Cuisine (food trade magazine). The first question Dr. Shotkoski answered was on the Golden Rice Project secretly held on Hunan children. Dr. Shotkoski denied these allegations and explained that the technology is safe, reliable, and able to benefit millions of malnourished communities. It was unfortunate that the Tufts University project's communication was not done properly leading outsiders to believe that it was operating illegally. Dr. Shotkoski further explained to reporters that genetically modified food was highly regulated, and with a higher rigor, burden and standards placed on biotechnology seed developers than those placed on pharmaceutical manufacturers. The technology is almost 20 years old and no one case of human sickness or allergy has been reported. Dr. Shotkoski added that in the United States, 85 percent of corn is genetically modified and it was almost unrealistic to avoid biotech food. Dr. Shotkoski commented to reporters that the biggest benefits of biotechnology were to produce foods at higher yields, higher quality and with less land and water as well as chemical inputs. Reporters exhausted their questions and personal doubts on the topic and were left with facts. The reporters seemed satisfied with all of Dr. Shotkoski's responses and promised to discuss biotechnology with their readers.

Media report on line

As expected, Dr. Shotkoski's visit to China generated heated media and public discussion. However, the tone of the reports and comments are increasingly balanced and less antagonistic than in previous years. Again, much of the skepticism reflected in netizen comments can be attributed to a lacking official government position on biotechnology and on the cooperation with grain supplying countries. We provided a link to the Financial News report from a media outlet based in Beijing:

<http://special.caixin.com/2012-12-13/100471933.html>

The journalist drafting the article below mentions that genetically modified rice is safe for human consumption based on a reassuring interview he had with Dr. Shotkoski. The article goes on to concur that biotechnology is a critical option to reduce China's food security concerns, though he points that transparent communication from U.S. government sources should be an important component of promotion efforts for genetically modified food.



ATO Guangzhou will continue to partner with traders and academics to mainly amplify the message that biotechnology is a critical tool to increase farming output, whether climate change issues on agriculture, and improve the health conditions and quality of life for farmers worldwide.